



Demonstrators in Brussels hold a giant Palestinian flag and anti-Israel signs (one proclaims 'Zionism, the enemy of Judaism') during a protest against the Israeli offensive against Hamas, July 27

# FUNDAMENTALIST ANTI-ZIONISTS

How has much of the political left gone from opposing anti-Semitism to actively encouraging it by demonizing the Jewish state? **By Tibor Krausz**



**J**ews, Milton Himmelfarb famously observed, earn like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans. What the Jewish American sociologist meant, in a 1973 article for *Commentary* magazine, was this: despite ranking among the wealthiest citizens, most American Jews still largely identified with the least successful members of society.

Actually, it would have been a surprise if they hadn't. For the past two millennia, being a Jew has invariably meant being an outsider – a tolerated, second-class citizen at best; a much maligned, persecuted soul at worst. A few decades of relative prosperity in America had not altered that fact.

Many Jews have long allied themselves almost reflexively with left-wing causes, but that doesn't mean leftists have been equally eager to reciprocate those sentiments. Far from it. Whereas once it was the stalwarts of the far right who baited and persecuted Jews any chance they got, these days it's those on the far left who, in the guise of "anti-Zionism," seek to isolate, delegitimize and dismantle the Jewish state at every turn. And they do so with the kind of virulence and righteous zeal that should warm the heart of any right-wing whack job.

That trend is not lost on Philip Mendes, an associate professor of social work at Australia's Monash University. "Many left-wing activists," he observes, use the term "Zionist" as a politically acceptable code word for Jew in order to permit them to express anti-Semitic views that would traditionally have been associated with the far Right." In charting the evolution of left-wing ideas about Jews from the French Revolution onward and Jews' natural affinity for left-wing politics, Mendes traverses familiar terrain but he does so with succinct, learned aplomb.

Triggered by the humanistic spirit of the Enlightenment, Jewish emancipation began to gain momentum with the 19th century advent of liberal ideas, even as the lot of Jews across Europe carried on seesawing between headway and setback. Apart from the occasional Rothschild and a burgeoning middle class of traders, artisans, financiers and bankers, Jews would largely continue to languish among the poorest of the poor – "pariah among pariahs," in the words of the German socialist Karl Kautsky – especially in Eastern Europe and Russia.

Predictably, many such Jews, despised in the east, unwelcome in the west, gravitated toward nascent socialist movements, which promised to liberate them once and for all

from the age-old yoke of penury, injustice and oppression. Not a few of them felt that socialism was giving collective voice to the Jewish "revolutionary spirit" that traced its origins to the teachings of the prophets Isaiah, Amos and Hosea, who preached about the need for *tzedaka*, or social justice.

## THE FAR LEFT, IN THE GUISE OF 'ANTI-ZIONISM,' SEEK TO ISOLATE, DELEGITIMIZE AND DISMANTLE THE JEWISH STATE AT EVERY TURN

Others, including Karl Marx, Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg, repudiated their Jewish roots and viewed themselves as cosmopolitan internationalists who had ridden themselves of the burden of old ethnic loyalties. They would often deride and excoriate their erstwhile coreligionists for their allegedly parochial and reactionary ways. To most socialists, gentile and Jew alike, this latter variety of Jew was the ideal or often only acceptable kind: Jews who were Jews only in name and dedicated themselves to collectivist universalism.

**YET SOCIALISTS** also pledged to do away with anti-Semitism by subsuming working-class Jews into the one big happy family of the international proletariat. Julius Brauntal, a Jewish Austrian socialist, insisted confidently that "the structure and spirit of a Socialist society precludes the emergence of anti-Semitism," adding that communism was "the only solution to the Jewish problem."

If only. There was a bit of a problem: just as for the right, so for the left too, Jews had long been convenient scapegoats for the ills of the world, and many a leftist ideologue detected the conspiratorial tendencies of those scheming Hebrews behind both domestic and global affairs. Stalin's Soviet Union would soon resume the kind of murderous harassment – through purges and deportations during the Great Terror of 1936-1938 and the so-called Doctors' Plot of 1952-3 – that Russian Jews had endured during the pogroms of the Tzarist era.

Still, by and large, while many socialists and left-wingers, Marx and Engels included,

did embrace traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes, they tended to be less rabid and doctrinaire in their animosity inasmuch as they ascribed negative Jewish characteristics, real or imagined, to the morally corrosive legacy of the oppression of Jews rather than to some inherent traits in them. "Marxists," Mendes writes, "viewed class rather than ethnicity or race as the key component of social analysis, and rejected anti-Semitism as an uncivilized and backward philosophy."

Left-wing sympathy for oppressed, disenfranchised Jews gained traction. "The Jews," Lenin, who repeatedly condemned anti-Semitism, wrote in 1903, "are our brothers, who, like us, are oppressed by capital; they are our comrades in the struggle for socialism." Russian socialists set up self-defense groups to protect Jews during pogroms and advocated for civil and political rights for them.

Even when left-wing support was more tepid, socialists were still the best friends most Jews had in the face of the alternative: rabidly anti-Semitic right-wing, conservative and nativist movements. Before World War II, Trotsky, a staunch anti-Zionist, warned of the genocidal threat facing Jews in Europe and his followers in the US championed the rights of Jewish refugees to immigrate to America. Meanwhile, European Social Democrats and several leading left-wing thinkers condemned state-sponsored anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union.

So how has much of the political left, whose ideology has been shaped and molded by Jews from the get-go, gone from opposing anti-Semitism to actively encouraging it by demonizing the Jewish state?

The short answer: Israel.

The long answer: As a powerless ethnic and religious minority, Jews eminently qualified as hapless victims worthy of leftist sympathy. As a people in their own thriving nation state enjoying overwhelming military and economic power over their neighbors, not so much.

Right from the first stirrings of political Zionism, most Marxists and socialists tended to look askance at Jewish nationalism, viewing it as an atavistic and reactionary movement. The Zionists' drive to carve out an old-new homeland for Jews in Palestine went against the very idea of socialist universalism that envisaged a global network of proletarian utopias where social, economic, religious and ethnic differences would belong to a benighted bourgeois past.

No sooner had Israel come into being

## Books

in 1948, supported initially by the Soviet Union, than left-wing anti-Semitism began to manifest itself in earnest in the form of “anti-Zionism.” Throughout the Eastern Bloc, state-run media outlets started churning out anti-Zionist propaganda, likening the Jewish state to Nazi Germany. Local Jewish communists found themselves facing charges of being in cahoots with Israel.

In 1952, Rudolf Slánský, the Czech Communist Party’s general secretary who happened to be an avid anti-Zionist, was coerced into “confessing” that “I deliberately shielded Zionism [by accusing critics of Israel] of anti-Semitism.” With 10 other leading Jewish communists, he was hanged. On cue, Britain’s communist newspaper the Daily Worker recycled Soviet propaganda by explaining that “it is an old trick to pretend to mistake opposition to Israel... for anti-Semitism.”

That line of special pleading has been with us ever since. Rare are the left-wing detractors of Israel who won’t insist ad nauseam that they have nothing against Jews per se and that it’s only their “criminal” state they can’t abide. It’s not Jews they detest, it’s “Zionists,” you see.

**MENDES DOESN’T** buy that excuse, and nor should we. “In recent decades anti-Zionist fundamentalism and anti-Semitism have increasingly converged,” he notes. “Some sections of the Left have returned to the essentialism of the early socialist movement where all Jews are stereotyped as oppressors, but now mostly as Zionists rather than capitalists [while leftist ideologues go about] demonizing all Israeli Jews and all Jewish supporters of Israel.”

Of course, we should add, most self-styled anti-Zionists still pay lip service to condemning anti-Semitism – the jackbooted neo-Nazi variety of it, that is. They’re rather less eager to censure, or even so much as acknowledge, the by far largest wellspring of virulent Jew hatred today: the Arab Muslim world where all the old calumnies against Jews, from blood libels to cockamamie conspiracy theories, have gained a new lease on life.

Progressives, Mendes argues, refuse to take pervasive Muslim anti-Semitism seriously “for fear that it will deflect attention from the suffering of the Palestinians.” They see Jews, the author adds, as “part of the middle-class, affluent and white elite” and so people who rank a lot lower on multiculturalism’s totem pole of righteous

victims than “Muslims or Arabs who also happen to form an increasingly large voting bloc in many European countries.”

Mendes quotes leftist leading light Noam Chomsky, a Jew by birth, dismissing anti-Semitism as a nonissue and arguing that “it’s raised (only) because privileged people [Jews] want to make sure they have total control, not just 98 per cent control.”

### WE HAVE THE CURIOUS PHENOMENON OF MANY LEFT-WINGERS FINDING COMMON CAUSE WITH RADICAL ISLAMISTS IN OPPOSING THE JEWISH STATE

In other words, once again it’s the Jews themselves who are held responsible for the hatred toward them. If not for Israel’s crimes against Palestinians, progressive thinking goes, Arabs would clasp Jews in a brotherly embrace to their bosom. Left unexplained is why anti-Semitism should be raging so violently in distant, non-Arab Muslim countries like Pakistan, which have experienced no negative fallout from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But therein lies the clue: it’s Israel’s very existence, not its conduct per se, that lies at the heart of modern Muslim Jew hatred. Religiously inspired animosity against a Jewish state, however tiny, in the Islamic heartland has turned the cause of the Palestinians into a lightning rod for collective Muslim grievances. Few Islamic firebrands, after all, have ever shed a tear over the plight of the equally stateless Muslim Kurds.

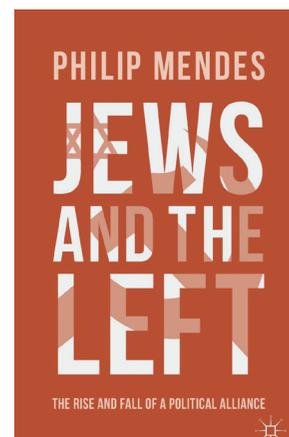
But many progressives are hamstrung by their self-imposed conceptual straitjacket that causes them to seek Western causes behind all the world’s problems, and so wittingly or not they have a blind spot about the failings and shortcomings of “third-world” societies, not least Islamic ones. And thus we have the curious phenomenon of many left-wingers finding common cause with radical Islamists – with whom they share little ideologically beyond their mutual hatred of Israel and its alleged enabler, the US – in opposing the Jewish state. At international BDS rallies, radical feminists stand

shoulder to shoulder with die-hard Islamist misogynists while gays and lesbians walk hand in hand with militant imams who routinely call for the beheading of gays and lesbians back home at the mosque.

Strange bedfellows, yes, but the end justifies the means and that end is the preferred elimination of Israel. Mendes calls such leftist firebrands (several of whom are Jewish) “anti-Zionist fundamentalists,” whose implacable loathing of Israel blinds them to facts, political and historical realities, and even decency and common sense. Mendes insists they’re a minority among today’s left-wingers, but if so, they appear to be a very vocal, tenacious and growing minority.

Where does that leave Jewish socialists in general these days? Usually, among the Israel bashers. Reflexive anti-Zionism, argued Steve Cohen, the late British Jewish socialist, has become a watermark of leftist ideological purity. “Denounce Zionism, crawl in the gutter, wear a yellow star and we’ll let you in the club,” he wrote apropos Europe’s current left-wing milieu that, just like former communist regimes, separates Jews into two varieties: “good” rabidly anti-Zionist Jews and the reprehensible rest of them.

Die-hard Jewish socialists should ask themselves if they really want to belong to a club that, to paraphrase Marx (Groucho, not Karl), will only accept them as members if they leave any vestige of Jewish national pride at the door. ■



#### **Jews and the Left: The Rise and Fall of a Political Alliance**

By Philip Mendes  
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